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Learning Onboard RWU's Research Vessel

From physical oceanography experiments to exploring coastal ecology and observing marine mammals, students gain hands-on lessons aboard the new 30-foot craft



Students in the physical oceanography course conduct water depth experiments onboard the research vessel.

August 14, 2018 | By Jill Rodrigues '05 and Justin Wilder

BRISTOL, R.I. – With the start of the Fall semester, that means students will be launching hands-on science lessons aboard the new research vessel, the *InVincebleSpirit*.

At Roger Williams University, our philosophy is to bring lessons to life through experiential learning, which doesn't happen only inside a classroom or lab. With our science curriculum, we bring you out into the field, into tidal areas along our beautiful coastline, and into the depths Mount Hope Bay and Narragansett Bay to study science in action.

That's why 20 students in a physical oceanography class found themselves taking part in launching the first full class onboard the research vessel, once the university received Coast Guard approval in the final weeks of the Spring semester. As they voyaged out into Mount Hope Bay for experiments with water depth, temperature and salinity, Professor Jennifer Pearce noted that it was the first time she's been able to take her entire class, computer science and marine biology majors alike, to explore what they've only studied in the classroom and lab.

"This new boat means that everybody in my class can participate – not just the marine biology majors; some are computer science majors, and for them, this is the only time they'll get to have this opportunity," Pearce says. When she worked with smaller research vessels she would ask for volunteers from class, finding that typically non-science majors "wouldn't step up so that science majors could get the opportunity. This way I can involve all my students in my experiments that normally wouldn't get that in their curriculum."

Purchased with a grant from the National Science Foundation (NSF) and outfitted with cutting-edge coastal research equipment thanks to a donation from an alumnus, the 30-foot craft significantly expands research capability and enables professors to bring entire classes onto the water or out to coastal areas for field research. Before this new resource, professors had to take multiple trips on smaller vessels to bring all their students out and make the lessons shorter.

Wearing a sweatshirt and jeans on the sunny day on the water, Jenna Lowe, a double major in environmental science and biology, deployed a high-tech multi-parameter sensor to measure salinity, conductivity, temperature and more at several points in the bay. It's a hands-on experience that she says prepares her to become a scientist.

"We get to apply our knowledge that we learn in the classroom and actually do the experiments and take data on the boat," she said, while in the lab they run experiments that "simulate ocean currents. But here we actually got to see the differences in water depth. I want to do field biology so these experiences will all help with the same field techniques that I will be applying in my career."

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